



steepert™

ed brubaker
sean phillips

#3
MAY



Sean
2002

SUGGESTED
FOR MATURE
READERS

WILDSTORM.COM

MANHATTAN, TWO
YEARS AGO...

THANKS. I
NEED TO GO TO
666 FIFTH AVENUE,
AND I'M RUNNING
LATE, SO--

--AH!

TAXI!

SCREECH

RELAX, AGENT
CARVER... SLIGHT
CHANGE OF PLANS,
THAT'S ALL.

JESUS FUCKING CHRIST,
LYNCH... I COULD'VE
KILLED YOU...

NOT LIKELY,
BUT THANKS FOR
THE THOUGHT.



SOMEONE ON
ME? I DIDN'T
SEE ANYONE.



NOT SURE, BUT
THE MEETING
PLACE WAS
COMPROMISED.
IT'S NOT
IMPORTANT.

WHAT'S
YOUR
SITUATION?



JESUS, THERE'S
NEVER ANY FOREPLAY
WITH YOU, IS THERE?

ALWAYS
STRAIGHT
TO BUSINESS.



IT'S A
HARD LIFE,
CARVER...

SHIT, YOU
GOT THAT
RIGHT, OLD
MAN...



SO, ARE YOU
GETTING
ANY CLOSER
TO TAO?



A LITTLE. I'VE HAD
TWO SIT-DOWNS WITH HIM
AND SOME OF THE OTHERS.
HE LIKED MY WORK ON THAT
PARIS THING...

THANK GOD FOR
SMALL FAVORS, RIGHT?





PARIS WAS A TRAGEDY, HOLDEN, BUT YOU'RE ON A HIGH PRIORITY ASSIGNMENT. SOME SACRIFICES HAVE TO BE MADE.

YOU KNOW THAT AS WELL AS I DO.

YEAH, SURE... TELL THAT TO THE FAMILIES OF THE PEOPLE WHO WORKED AT THAT EMBASSY.

I'M SURE IT'LL BE A LOT OF COMFORT THAT THE GUY WHO PUSHED THE BUTTON IS REALLY WORKING FOR THE GOOD GUYS.



YOU WANT ME TO PULL OVER SO YOU CAN HAVE A LITTLE CRY, AGENT?

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT --SCREW YOU, SIR.



YOU WANNA BE ANGRY AT ME, THAT'S FINE. BUT DON'T LET THIS BULLSHIT GET IN THE WAY OF YOUR FUCKING JOB.

WHAT, YOU THINK ALL THE PEOPLE YOU KILLED FOR I.O. DIDN'T HAVE FAMILIES THAT LOVED THEM, TOO?



INNOCENT PEOPLE WILL DIE BECAUSE OF YOU, HOLDEN. THAT'S A FACT OF YOUR LIFE NOW.

HOPEFULLY MORE WILL BE SAVED.



NOW ARE YOU GOING TO GIVE ME YOUR REPORT, OR NOT...?





SOMETHING ON
YOUR MIND,
HOLDEN?



NOTHING.
JUST WONDERING
WHERE WE'RE
HEADED, THAT'S
ALL...

I TOLD YOU
ALREADY, IT'S A
SURPRISE...

WHAT, DON'T
YOU LIKE
SURPRISES?

SOMEWHERE OVER
THE UNITED
STATES, NOW...

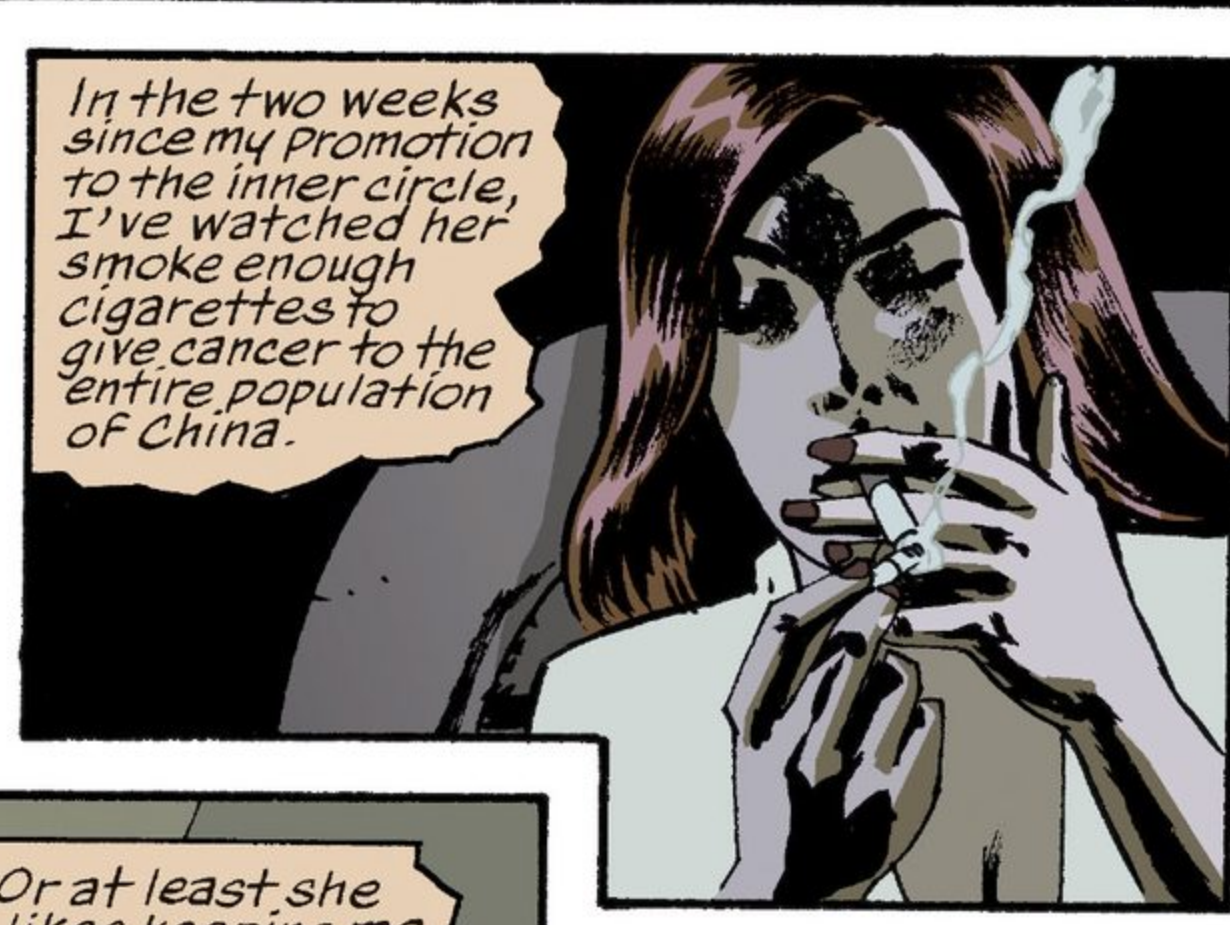
NOT PARTICULARLY,
NO...



SECRETS AND LIES



This is my new traveling companion, Miss Misery, the second-ranking Prodigal in Tao's organization.



In the two weeks since my promotion to the inner circle, I've watched her smoke enough cigarettes to give cancer to the entire population of China.



And unlike me, she likes surprises.



Or at least she likes keeping me in the dark as long as humanly possible.



She likes a few other things, too...



...As I've come to learn...

... And she likes some of them a bit more than I'm used to.

WASHINGTON, D.C.,
TWO NIGHTS AGO...

SORRY, BUT HOW MUCH LONGER ARE WE GOING TO HAVE TO WAIT FOR THIS SON OF A BITCH?

UNTIL HE SHOWS UP.

GREAT. YOU CARE TO GIVE ME ANY INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THE HELL WE'RE DOING WHILE WE WAIT?

IT'S NOT COMPLICATED, HOLDEN.

THERE'S A MAN STAYING AT THIS HOTEL NOW, AND I NEED TO QUESTION HIM ABOUT SOME THINGS HE KNOWS THAT HE SHOULDN'T.

AND NONE OF THE TORPEDOES COULD HANDLE THIS?

NO.

EMBASSADOR

IT'S TOO IMPORTANT, OKAY? AND IT'S MORE FALLOUT FROM YOU AND YOUR IDIOT FRIEND KILLING STEELEYE. SO YOU HAVE TO BE HERE.

C'MON.

HEY-- I DIDN'T KILL HIM. I JUST LIED ABOUT IT.

AND THEY CALL THAT **ACCESSORY** AFTER THE FACT IN THE REAL WORLD, DON'T THEY?

WHATEVER... SO HOW'S THIS GUY CONNECTED TO STEELEYE?

THERE WERE SOME MENTAL IMPLANTS IN HIM. SINCE STEELEYE'S DEATH, THEY'VE STARTED TO DISSIPATE.

WE CAN'T CONTROL HIM ANYMORE.

AT LEAST, WE'RE NOT SURE IF WE CAN OR NOT.

I'M SORRY, MISS, BUT THERE'S NO SMOKING IN THE HOTEL.

IT'S OKAY, I HAVE A MEDICAL CONDITION.

WHAT? HEY--



PEOPLE AND
THEIR FUCKING
RULES.



WHAT
FLOOR?

24th... HE'S ON THE
TOP FLOOR.

WHEN WE STEP OUT INTO THE
HALL, I'M GOING TO SHUT
DOWN THIS WHOLE POWER
GRID, SO BE READY TO GO.



RIGHT. THESE
BODYGUARDS
ANYTHING
SPECIAL?

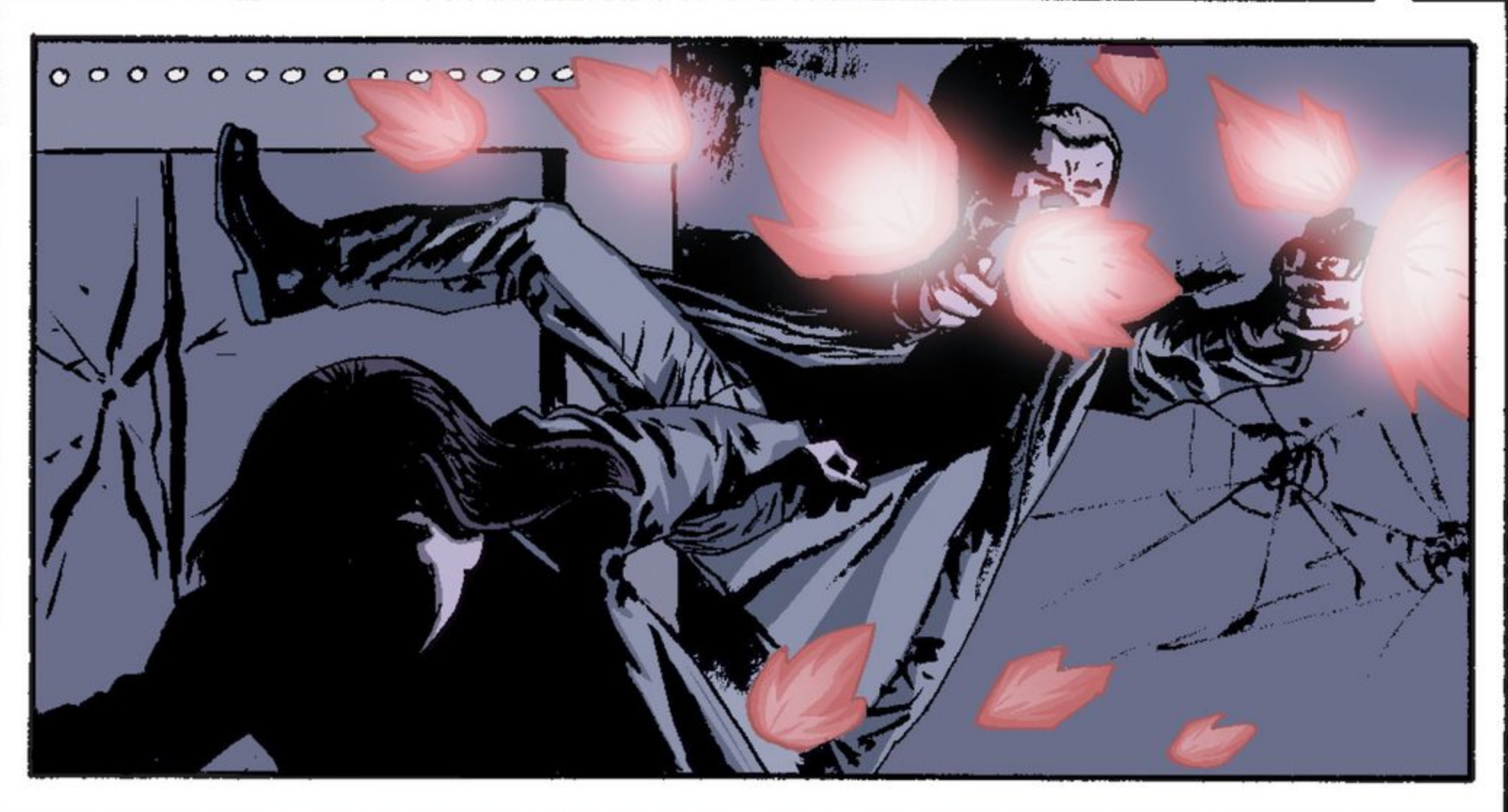


SOME TECH
ENHANCEMENTS.
NOTHING A BULLET
TO THE HEAD WON'T
PUT DOWN.



DING

THIS
IS US...









WHO
THE **FUCK**
DID YOU TALK
TO?

STOP IT...
STOP. DO YOU
EVEN KNOW
WHAT TAO'S
DOING?

HE CAN'T JUST
PLAY WITH ALL
OF US LIKE THIS...
IT'S... **SICK**...

I WAS TRYING
TO SAVE YOU,
TOO...

DON'T DO ME
ANY FAVORS,
ASSHOLE...

AHH!



YAAAAA!



And that's when
her true colors
come out, while
she's beating the
living shit out of
a guy too defeated
to even resist.

...In fact, she's never
looked more beautiful
than she does at that
moment.

She's almost
glowing.



Eventually, Etcher gave up the names of the people he'd spoken to about Tao.

There are only two of them, and they're dead by the next morning.

Etcher himself doesn't last that long.

And the look on her face when she crushes his throat stays with me for a long time.



ORIGIN STORIES.

HEADS OR TAILS?

I'M NOT GOING TO PLAY THAT STUPID GAME. I'M NOT SOME KID ON HIS FIRST--



FINE. HEADS.



YOU LOSE. SPILL IT...



ALL RIGHT, GOD...
LET ME SEE IF I CAN
EVEN REMEMBER
HOW TO DO THIS...



"ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A NICE
YOUNG GIRL NAMED GRETCHEN MACDONALD.
SHE WAS THE KIND OF GIRL EVERY PARENT
WANTS THEIR CHILD TO BE..."



"...CLASS VALEDICTORIAN, BELIEVED IN GOD,
DIDN'T DRINK, SMOKE, FUCK, OR DO DRUGS.



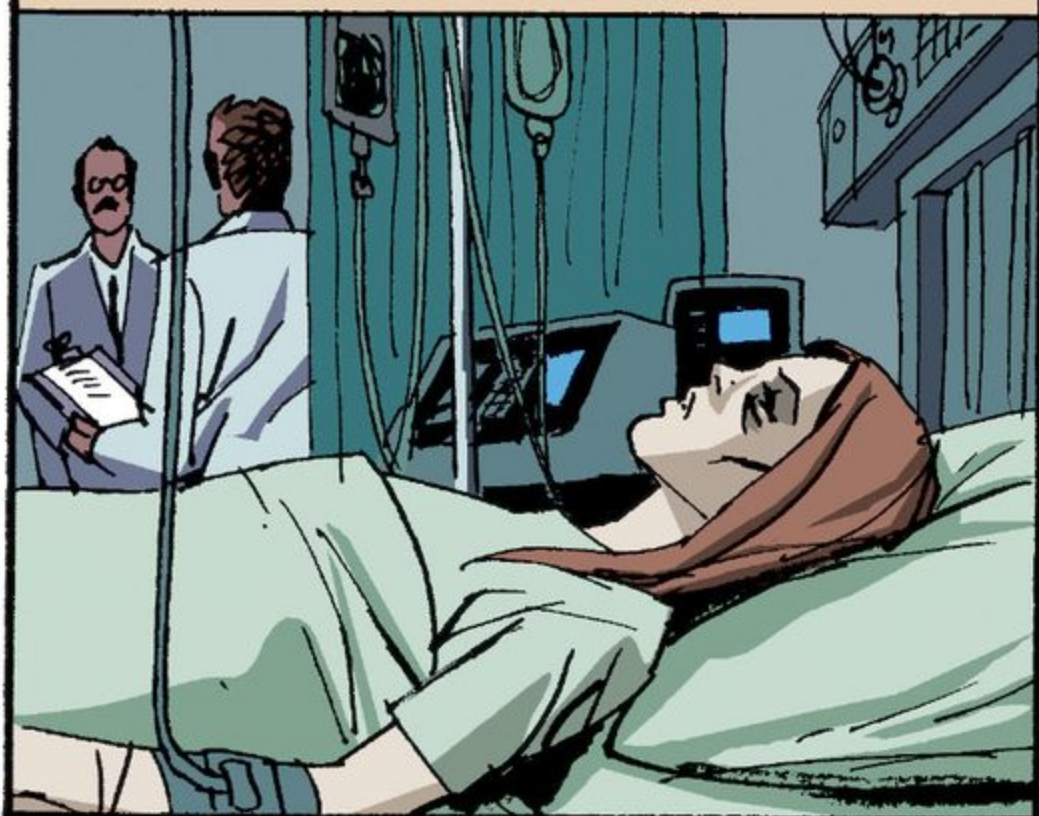
"SHE WAS AS BORING AND HAPPY AS ANY
WHITE GIRL IN AMERICA COULD EVER HOPE
TO BE. HAD BIG PLANS FOR THE FUTURE...
CAREER, KIDS, THE WHOLE APPLE PIE DREAM.



"EXCEPT SOMETHING WENT WRONG FOR
POOR GRETCHEN. SHE STARTED TO GET
SICK. REALLY SICK..."



"AND NO ONE COULD FIGURE OUT EXACTLY
WHAT WAS WRONG WITH HER... SOME
DOCTORS THOUGHT IT WAS MENTAL, SOME
SAID ENVIRONMENTAL..."



"IT DIDN'T SEEM FAIR, REALLY, SINCE
HER WHOLE LIFE SHE'D ALWAYS DONE
ALL THE RIGHT THINGS..."



"AND IT WENT ON FOR YEARS. SHE'D START TO GET BETTER, AND THINK EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO BE OKAY AGAIN..."



"... THEN THE NEXT WEEK SHE'D BE WORSE THAN EVER. IT WAS LIKE HER WHOLE BODY WAS REJECTING ITSELF."



"FINALLY ONE DAY, AFTER ALMOST THREE YEARS OF HOSPITALS AND SKEPTICAL DOCTORS AND BLOOD TESTS AND EVERYTHING, SHE'D SIMPLY HAD ENOUGH..."

"AN EMERGENCY ROOM INTERN SAID SOMETHING THOUGHTLESS, AND THE PERFECT GOOD LITTLE AMERICAN GIRL JUST **SNAPPED**..."



"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HER LIFE, SHE ACTUALLY **STRUCK** ANOTHER PERSON..."



THAT MOMENT CHANGED EVERYTHING. IT WAS--

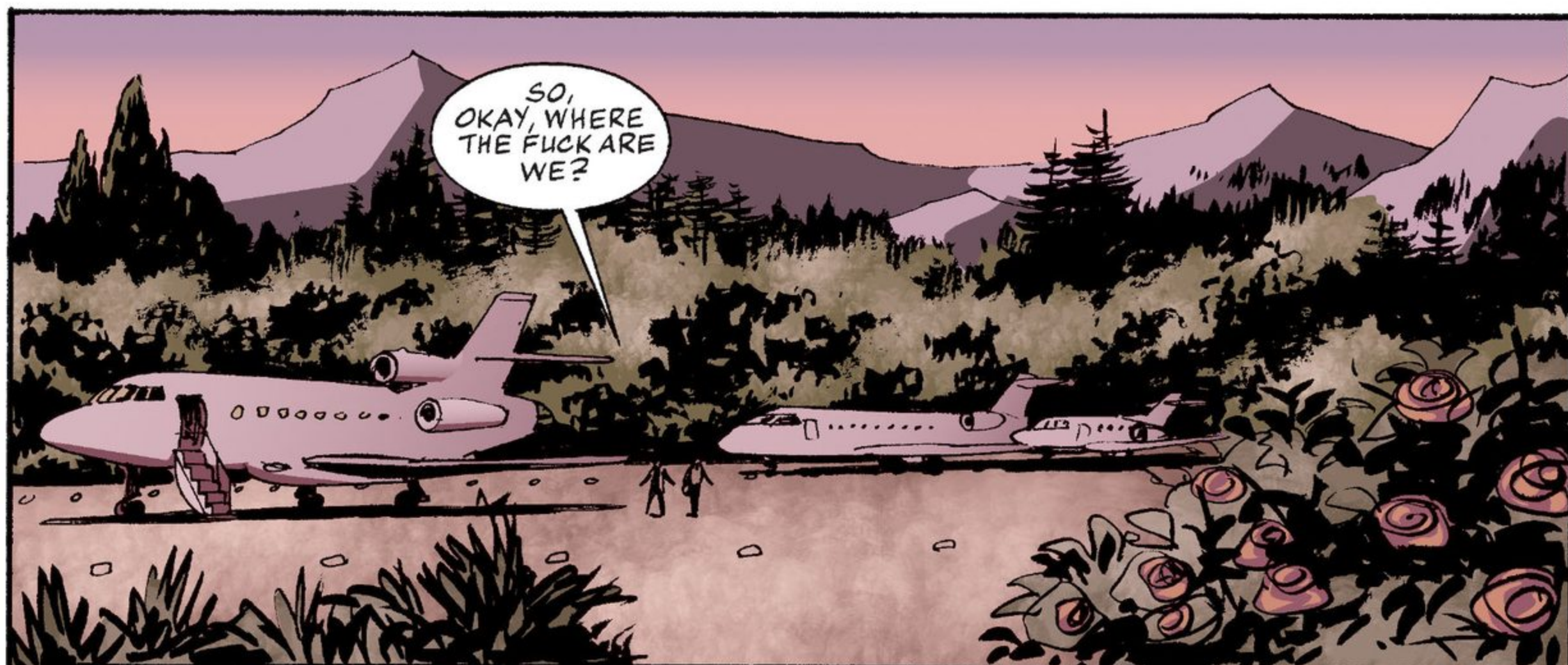
SORRY TO INTERRUPT, MA'AM, BUT WE'LL BE LANDING IN A MINUTE.



ALL RIGHT, WE'VE GOT SOME WORK TO DO NOW... WE CAN FINISH THIS LATER...

HEY, WE BETTER. IT'S JUST GETTING TO THE GOOD PART.



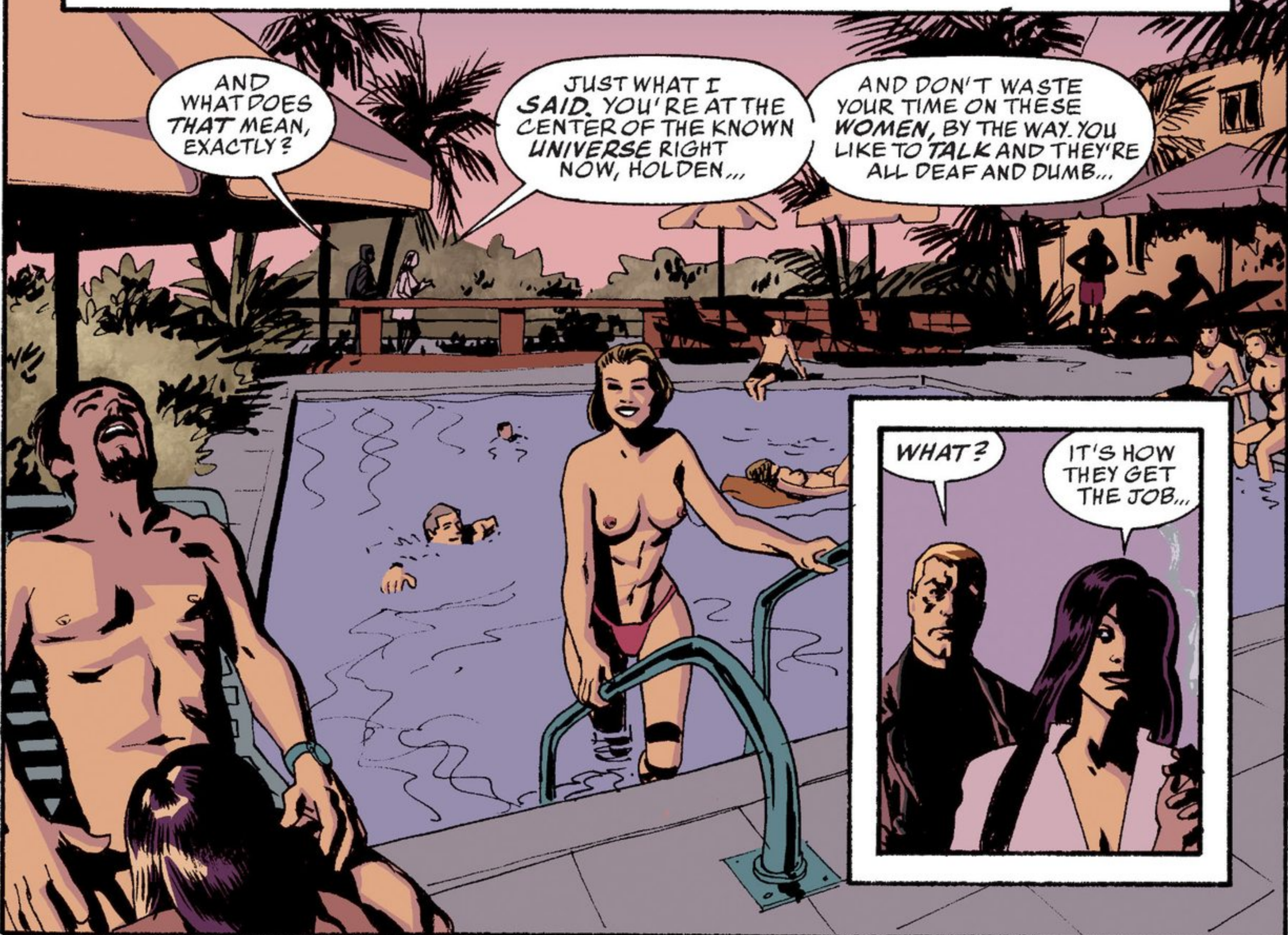


SO,
OKAY, WHERE
THE FUCK ARE
WE?



THIS IS
IMPERIAL
GROVE...

ONCE A YEAR, THE
MOST IMPORTANT
PLACE IN THE WORLD,
EVEN IF THE REST OF
THE WORLD DOESN'T
KNOW IT...



AND
WHAT DOES
THAT MEAN,
EXACTLY?

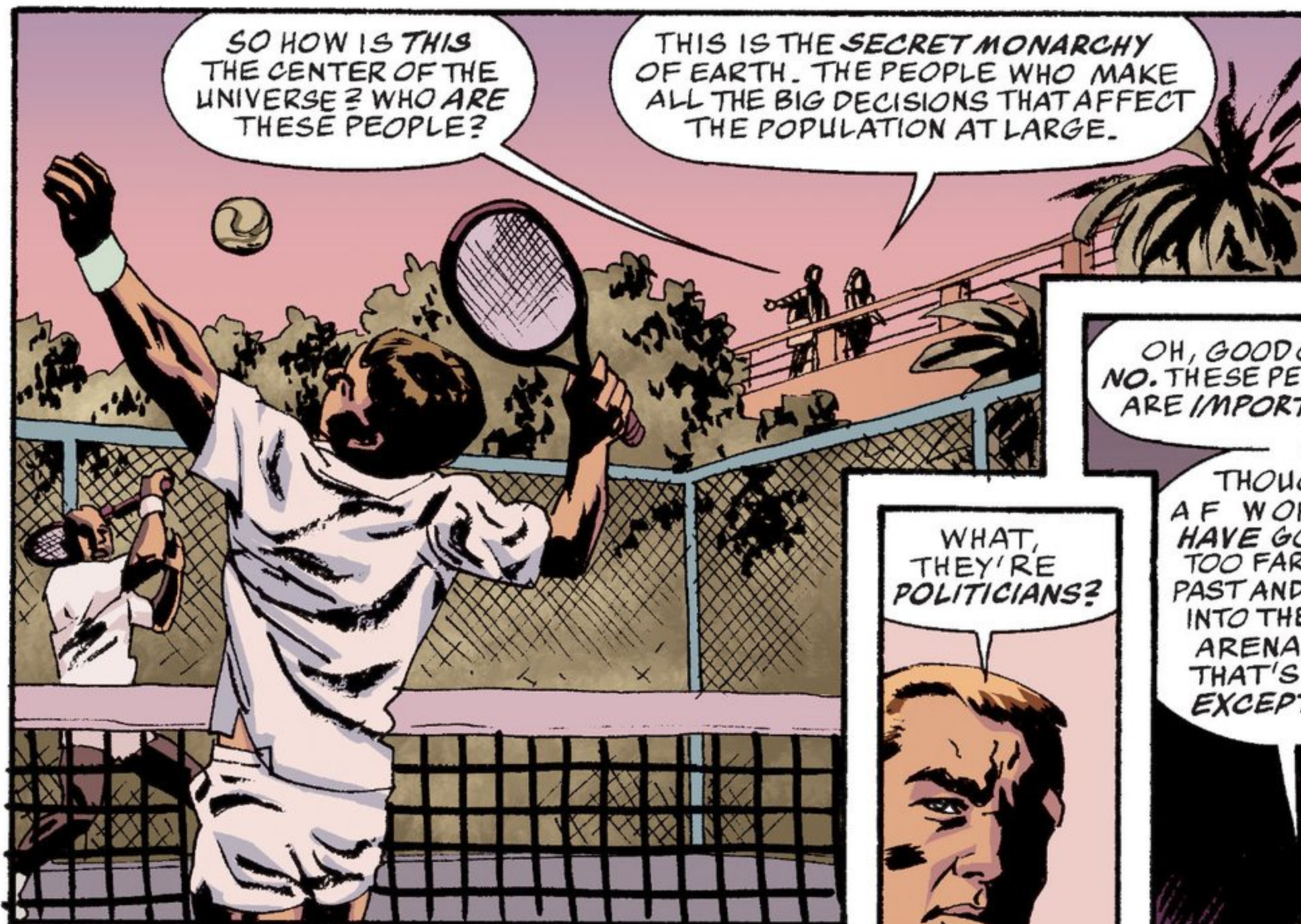
JUST WHAT I
SAID. YOU'RE AT THE
CENTER OF THE KNOWN
UNIVERSE RIGHT
NOW, HOLDEN...

AND DON'T WASTE
YOUR TIME ON THESE
WOMEN, BY THE WAY. YOU
LIKE TO TALK AND THEY'RE
ALL DEAF AND DUMB...



WHAT?

IT'S HOW
THEY GET
THE JOB...



SO HOW IS THIS
THE CENTER OF THE
UNIVERSE? WHO ARE
THESE PEOPLE?

THIS IS THE SECRET MONARCHY
OF EARTH. THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE
ALL THE BIG DECISIONS THAT AFFECT
THE POPULATION AT LARGE.

OH, GOOD GOD
NO. THESE PEOPLE
ARE IMPORTANT.

THOUGH
A F W OF THEM
HAVE GONE
TOO FAR IN THE
PAST AND GOTTEN
INTO THE PUBLIC
ARENA. BUT
THAT'S THE
EXCEPTION.

WHAT,
THEY'RE
POLITICIANS?



LET ME SEE IF
I CAN MAKE IT SIMPLER.
YOU KNOW WHEN SOME-
ONE SAYS--

THERE ARE ALIENS
BURIED AT AREA 51, EXCEPT
THEY DON'T WANT YOU
TO KNOW THAT.

OR-- THE FREEMASONS
RUN THE WORLD, BUT THEY
DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW
ABOUT IT.

THESE
PEOPLE
HERE, THIS
IS THEY.



REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE ORIGINAL KINGS OF EUROPE AND AMERICA, DOWN THROUGH GENERATIONS, AS WELL AS MORE RECENT ROYALTY...

CORPORATE ROYALTY, AS THE OLD BLOOD CALLS IT.

KINGS OF AMERICA?

Uh huh... THAT'S THE CURRENT RULER OF THE OF THE PACIFIC NORTH-WEST GETTING HIS KNOB GOBBLED BY THE POOL.

JESUS...AND WE'RE PART OF THIS? TAO IS, I MEAN...

NOT EXACTLY, BUT HE DOES PARTICIPATE IN THE MEETING IN A WAY.

YOU'LL SEE WHEN HE GETS HERE.

AND THEY MEET ONCE A YEAR FOR WHAT?

TO DECIDE WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE WORLD, FROM WHO WILL BE ELECTED, WHAT REGION WILL HAVE CONSTANT WARFARE, TO WHAT BAND WILL BE AT THE TOP OF THE BILLBOARD CHARTS...

WHAT? WHY WOULD THEY GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THAT?

POP CULTURE IS JUST ANOTHER WAY TO CONTROL THE MASSES, HOLDEN... IT KEEPS THEM STUPID.



--OKAY,
SO WHERE
WAS I?

AT THE
HOSPITAL,
BEATING
UP AN
INTERN...

OH, RIGHT, OF
COURSE...



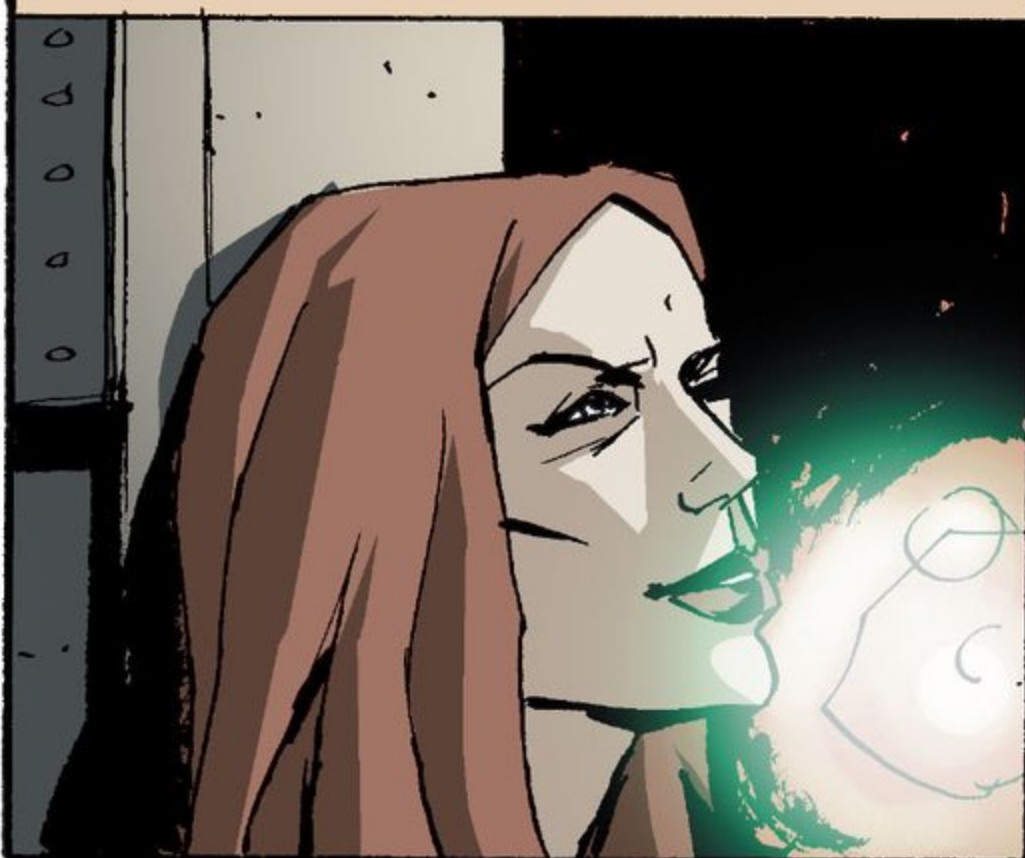
"WELL, SHE WAS IN SUCH A FRIGHT AFTER
ATTACKING SOMEBODY THAT SHE FLED
THE SCENE..."



"...AND IT WAS ONLY FOUR OR FIVE BLOCKS
LATER WHEN SHE STOPPED TO CATCH HER
BREATH THAT SHE REALIZED SOMETHING
STRANGE WAS GOING ON..."



"SHE FELT REALLY GOOD FOR THE FIRST
TIME. ALMOST LIKE HER OLD SELF BE-
FORE THE ILLNESS HAD STRUCK."



"SUDDENLY SHE WAS FACED WITH THE POSSIBILITY THAT HER ILLNESS HAD BEEN EMOTIONAL THE WHOLE TIME, MAYBE THE RESULT OF REPRESSED ANGER.



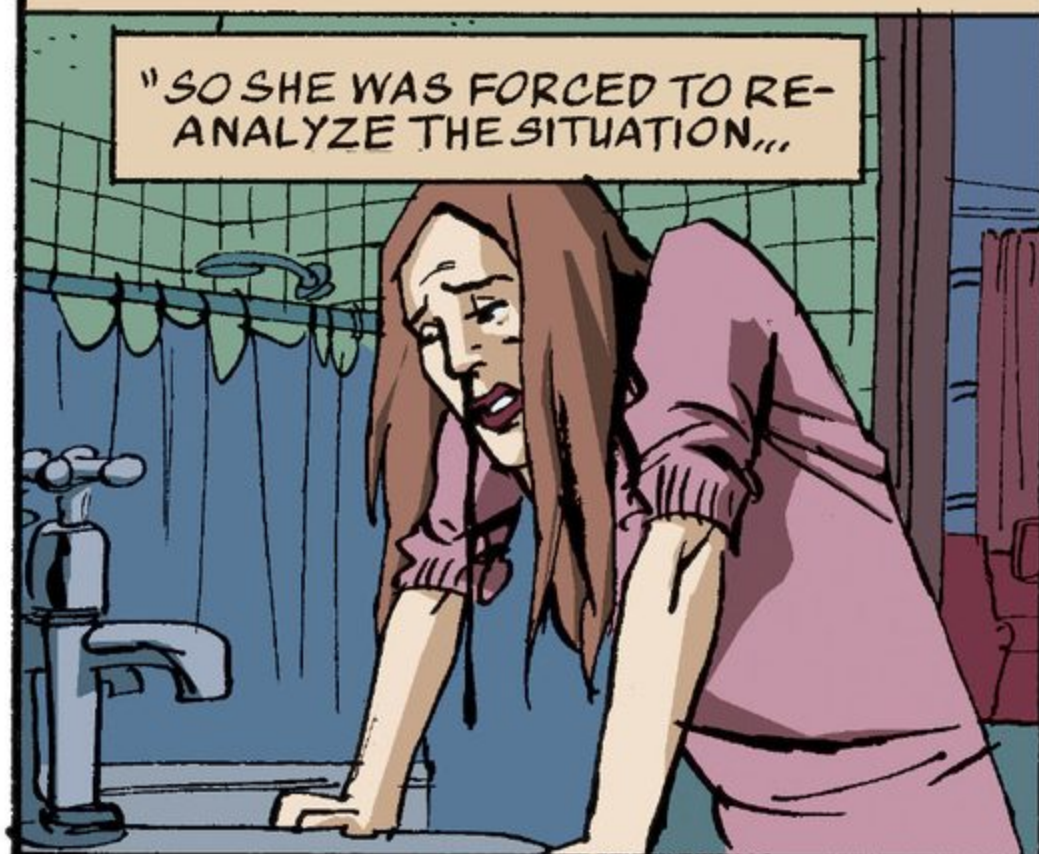
"WITH THAT THEORY, SHE BEGAN PRIMAL SCREAM THERAPY..."

"SHE HAD TO ADMIT SHE DID STORE UP HER EMOTIONS, AND IT FELT GOOD TO GET THEM OUT IN THE OPEN.



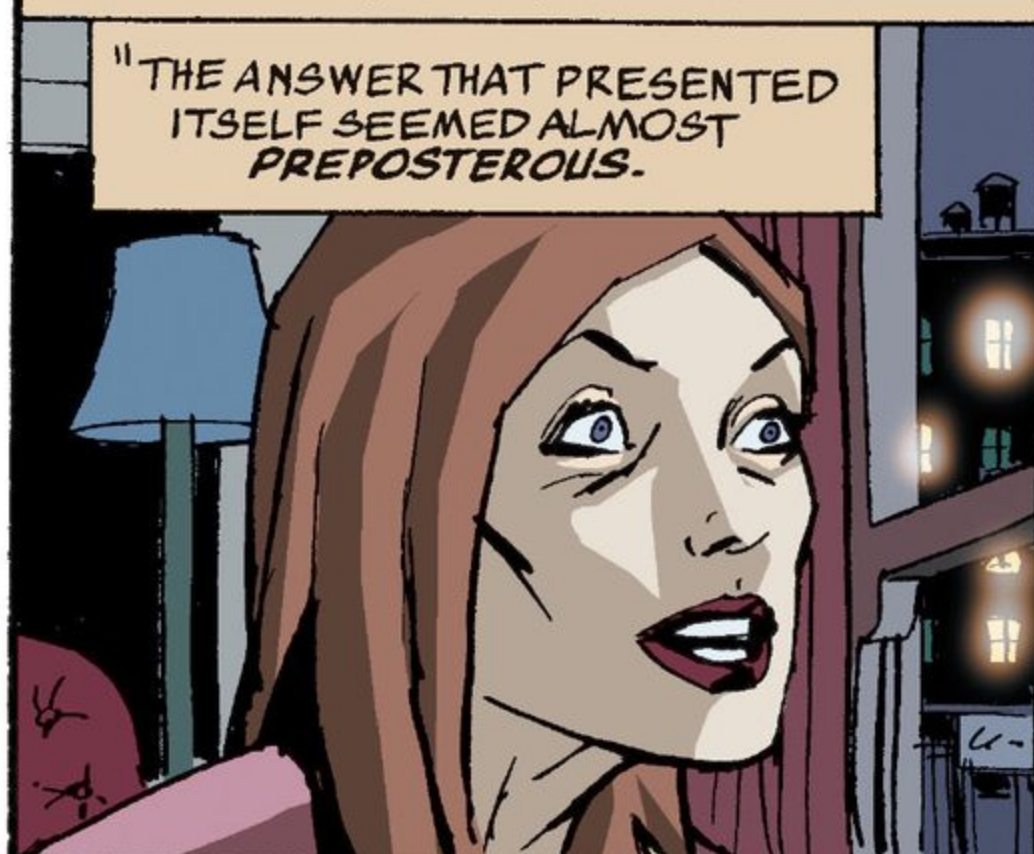
"BUT IT DIDN'T WORK, WITHIN DAYS OF THE INCIDENT AT THE HOSPITAL, SHE BEGAN TO FEEL SICK AGAIN.

"SO SHE WAS FORCED TO RE-ANALYZE THE SITUATION..."



"IF IT HADN'T BEEN THE RELEASE OF HER EMOTIONS THAT HAD MADE HER FEEL BETTER SO QUICKLY, WHAT WAS IT?"

"THE ANSWER THAT PRESENTED ITSELF SEEMED ALMOST PREPOSTEROUS.



"STILL, SHE WAS DESPERATE ENOUGH THAT SHE HAD TO TEST IT OUT..."

"SHE STARTED SMALL, A LITTLE SHOPLIFTING... JUST SOMETHING SHE KNEW WAS THE WRONG THING TO DO..."



"...AND GOD DAMN IF SHE DIDN'T FEEL BETTER AFTERWARDS.

"SHE FELT EVEN BETTER AFTER SHE'D POLISHED OFF THE BOTTLE OF SCOTCH THAT SHE'D STOLEN, TOO.



"IT SEEMED LIKE A JOKE -- ALL HER LIFE SHE'D PLAYED BY THE RULES, AND THEY'D LEFT HER AT DEATH'S DOOR..."

"AND NOW THE ONLY CURE APPEARED TO BE BREAKING THOSE SAME RULES."



"BUT IT *WORKED*. WITH EACH ACT, SHE BECAME STRONGER, HEALTHIER, ALMOST A PERFECT HUMAN SPECIMEN..."



"AND THE REALLY FUNNY PART WAS HOW *EASY* IT WAS. THE HORROR OF HER ACTIONS FADED SO QUICKLY WHEN BALANCED AGAINST HER OWN SURVIVAL."



"THAT WAS HOW SHE FOUND HERSELF, AWAY FROM THE PERSON SOCIETY HAD ALWAYS TOLD HER SHE WAS *SUPPOSED* TO BE..."



"THAT WAS HOW SHE BECAME *MISS MISERY*..."



"...THE END."

JESUS CHRIST... THAT'S ABOUT THE HARSHTEST ORIGIN STORY I'VE EVER HEARD..."



I'VE HEARD WORSE.

KEEP PLAYING THIS GAME AND I'M SURE YOU WILL, TOO.



BUT THE THING ABOUT THE STORY, THE THING I LIKE ABOUT IT, IS THAT IT HIGHLIGHTS THE *DIFFERENCE* BETWEEN THE REST OF YOU AND ME...

OH, YEAH? HOW SO?

SEE, YOU... YOU THINK THERE'S A *LINE* THAT YOU *CROSSED*. SOMETHING THAT MADE YOU GO FROM GOOD TO BAD.

MAYBE YOU *GET OFF* ON IT, I DON'T KNOW... BUT FOR ME THERE IS NO *LINE*.

I DON'T THINK THE THINGS I DO ARE WRONG, HOLDEN. I BECAME WHO I REALLY AM, AND I'LL *DIE* IF I'M NOT TRUE TO THAT...

AND BESIDES, WHO DO YOU THINK MADE ALL THESE *CODES OF CONDUCT* WE'RE SUPPOSED TO FOLLOW IN THE FIRST PLACE?

WHO? THIS *SECRET MONARCHY* BACK THERE?

MAYBE...

... I SUSPECT YOU'LL FIND OUT TOMORROW.

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END OF
ISSUE
THREE